RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE USE OF PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT MEASURES TO IMPLEMENT SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

The notion of sustainable communities holds considerable promise for delivering multiple economic, social and environmental benefits to the highly urbanized citizenry of Canada.

Sustainable community development however, is very different from standard development practices and its implementation holds new challenges. One very important approach to bridge the gap between theory and practice involves the use of performance assessment measures (PAMs) within the context of community sustainability and reporting initiatives. When quantitative targets are used in combination with indicators for the purposes of evaluating the effectiveness or efficiency of government or non-governmental actions, we refer to them as performance assessment measures (PAMs). Little work has been undertaken to evaluate local-level experience with PAMs in this context.

A community sustainability and reporting initiative involving PAMs usually has seven core elements:

- A set of policy goals or objectives (e.g., improve water conservation).
- A set of measurable indicators chosen to represent the policy goals or objectives (e.g., litres/person).
- A baseline set of data to describe current or historical conditions (e.g. 300 litres/person/day).
- A set of numerical targets representing a desired future state (e.g., 200 litres/person/day).
- A time-frame(s) for realizing the target (e.g., 250 litres/person/day in five years and 200 litres/person/day in 10 years).
- An action plan or series of steps that need to be implemented to achieve the target.
- A reporting framework (e.g., public status report every 3 years).

This project reviews some of the best efforts to date related to developing PAMs in order to move sustainable community development from the vision and goal setting stage into practice. The seven studies are:

- Buffalo's State of the Region Report, NY
- Don Watershed, ON
- Civano, AZ
- Hamilton-Wentworth, ON
- Okotoks, AB
- Santa Monica, CA
- Southeast False Creek, BC

FINDINGS

The case studies revealed that both broad public and specific municipal operational benefits are derived from the establishment of PAMs. These many benefits make the effort to establish them worthwhile. Essentially, PAMs represent an invaluable tool for politicians, city managers and citizens to develop a wide range of policies and programs that lead to the operationalization of sustainable community policies and visions. Some of the key uses for PAMs identified include:

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- Political and staff education and awareness raising.
- Support for internal priority setting and budgeting processes.
- Program and policy review and revision.
- The identification and implementation of capital and operational cost savings.
- Developing operations, planning guidelines, and zoning bylaws.
- General public education regarding sustainable development.
- Key stakeholder education and awareness building and negotiations with developers.
- Partnership identification and development around commonly shared interests.
- Staff evaluation and performance incentive development.

Process for Developing PAMs

Designing performance assessment measures typically involves a combination of staff and expert research and analysis. This is required to establish an initial set of baseline data and PAMs, followed by public consultation. Community consultation techniques used include:

- Local workshops.
- Direct Participation on Task Forces/Committees.
- Workbooks mailed to the broad community.
- Surveys distributed to households.
- Mail-outs in utility bills.
- Indirectly, through the media.

Methods of Target Setting

Numerous methods were used to establish specific targets for PAMs and include the following:

The adoption of pre-existing targets from studies or policies completed by national, state, provincial, regional or local governments or related agencies.

- Conducting a literature review to identify appropriate benchmarks.
- Use of experts through special workshops, interviews and the use of consultants.
- Historical literature review to help establish baseline information.
- Telephone and mail-out surveys of public attitudes and values.
- Special workshops for key stakeholders.
- Cost-benefit and technical feasibility analysis.
- Political sensitivity analysis.
- In the absence of sufficient information, best professional judgment or 'gut feel'.

Baseline Data, Reporting and Monitoring

A number of important insights were gained with respect to reporting and monitoring targets:

- An annual, three or five year reporting period is considered reasonable, but may vary by the PAM.
- The process for revising selected targets should include key stakeholders.
- Produce interim reports for selected PAMs when there is a more urgent need to track progress and make policy and program adjustments.
- Ensure that the monitoring of key targets is within the organization's jurisdiction.
- Adopt a reporting format that corresponds to the organization's key audiences.
- Develop a media relations or outreach strategy to help build public interest in the project and to communicate the results.

Options for Dealing with Possible Conflict over PAMs

Some conflict may arise when developing PAMs and it is important to have a strategy to make it constructive. The case studies revealed a number of options for addressing conflict constructively:

- Drop individual PAMs that are too controversial or delay their development.
- Abandon the notion of setting quantitative targets for certain controversial indicators and instead, adopt "directional targets", like "decreasing home energy consumption".
- Refer a controversial PAM to another agency for further development.
- Undertake to study the technical or economic feasibility of the PAM in question.
- Postpone adopting a quantitative target until further data or analysis becomes available and/or the next reporting period.
- Adopt an interim target with the proviso that it will be reviewed and appropriately revised at some future date.

Enhancing the Legitimacy of PAMs

The use of PAMs raises questions of legitimacy due to the fact that they may have a more direct influence on political and staff accountability and on the allocation of public resources than do indicators. Our case studies revealed a number of issues and techniques in helping to build the legitimacy of PAMs:

- Political and bureaucratic 'buy-in' should be sought in order to ensure better chances of implementation.
- Balance the ambitiousness of targets with a 'realistic' assessment of what can be achieved under local conditions and established timeframes.
- Incorporate the widest range of interests by choosing PAMs that match their needs, and the goals, objectives and vision of the sustainable community project.
- Ensure that both the general public and key experts and community leaders have a meaningful role in the process of developing the PAMs.
- Achieve the broadest consensus over targets, including both stakeholders and the public.
- Ensure that an adequate outreach and communication program is in place to 'sell' the program to the general public, gain support for policy and program changes and to address criticisms.
- Develop an accessible and technically defensible reporting framework.
- Avoid establishing contradictory or inconsistent targets and ensure that they reflect the indicators and broader goals and objectives of the sustainable community initiative.

Strengthening Implementation

Achieving a target involves linking the target to specific recommended actions or steps that indicate how the targets are going to be met, and by whom, in a given time period. The implementing agency can facilitate this objective by:

- Ensuring that those who will be responsible for implementing the program have 'bought into' the process and the targets (i.e., obtain official endorsement of the associated targets).
- Understanding the needs of key stakeholder groups and work to address their concerns during the implementation of the PAMs.
- Incorporating the objectives and targets into key municipal and regional documents.
- Removing regulatory barriers that would impede the implementation of the PAMs.
- Building flexibility into the design of the PAMs and remaining flexible during implementation.
- Using PAMs to guide and evaluate staff in annual performance reviews.

CONCLUSION

Initial efforts to use PAMs in support of community sustainability are very promising and suggest that quantified targets represent a key step in our ongoing efforts to define and implement sustainable community development practices. Despite the challenges and the potential for conflict, our research shows that these were outweighed by benefits such as clarifying community goals, establishing priorities, improving accountability, raising awareness and promoting concrete implementation. In fact, all of the participants in the case studies interviewed felt that establishing PAMs were well worth the effort. The establishment of PAMs are a much needed, logical next step in the efforts of Canadian community leaders to mobilize resources in order to move toward the implementation of more sustainable and liveable communities.

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